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ABSTRACT

Children who experience neglect require immediate help because severe deprivation can affect all aspects of children's development. Parental behaviors indicative of child neglect include failure to (1) feed children adequately, (2) insure adequate medical care, (3) maintain good personal hygiene, (4) clothe children appropriately, (5) supervise and protect children, and (6) provide adequate shelter. Additional signs of neglect in the educational area are failure to (7) insure that children have an opportunity to learn, (8) adhere to designated school hours, (9) participate in school activities, and (10) keep scheduled appointments. In identifying neglect, educators should look for patterns of these behaviors rather than isolated instances. Teachers should recognize and accept the likelihood of slow progress in improving the neglectful situation. If neglect is severe, teachers should immediately notify the local department of social services. On an informal level, various additional actions can be taken, such as explaining to parents the possible legal consequences of inadequate child care and helping parents keep their fears and anxieties from growing out of proportion. (RH)

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Neglected Children: Understanding, Identifying and Working with Their Parents

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Neglected Children: Understanding, Identifying and Working with Their Parents

Child neglect, the failure of parents and caregivers to meet children's needs adequately, has long been a problem accorded little attention. Although educators have spent considerable time and effort acting on behalf of battered children, they have invested much less time working to improve the plight of those who have been neglected. This has occurred regardless of the recognition that neglect is three times more common than abuse (annually one million cases of neglect versus 300,000 cases of battering) (Polansky, Hally, & Polansky, 1975), and the belief that neglect is likely to have more detrimental long range consequences (Williams, 1980). Educators, as ever, are in the first line of defense to recognize and assist children who are in need of intervention. They must realize that children who experience neglect require immediate help as severe deprivation can affect all aspects of children's development including physical, social, intellectual, and emotional growth.

It is possible to speculate why child neglect has been a "neglected" issue. One difficulty lies in its definition. Unlike abuse, where most individuals will agree observable levels of physical harm constitute maltreatment, neglect is a more subjective phenomenon. What may appear to be neglect by one group's standards (e.g., not having a child's dental needs met) may constitute an acceptable norm of another group. A second difficulty is the chronic nature of neglect. Whereas incidents of abuse may be readily identified (e.g., broken bones, welts, bruises, cuts, cigarette burns), indications of neglect are much less obvious (e.g., fatigue, hunger, listlessness, lack of immunization).

One approach which teachers should take when children neglect is suspected is to attend to the behaviors of the believed victims' parents. It is unjustified

to conclude a child is experiencing neglect solely on the basis of observations of the child. Rather, teachers need to contact and interact with the children's parents before making such a determination. While characteristics of children will alert educators to the possibility that neglect is occurring, only observations and interactions with parents can confirm suspected conditions of neglect. Teachers need to be aware of the behavioral characteristics typically linked to neglecting parents to facilitate identification of incidents and notification of appropriate personnel and agencies to intervene on children's behalf. As a word of caution, it should be recognized that school personnel may observe one or more of these behaviors in a parent who is not neglecting a child. Educators, therefore, should look for patterns of these behaviors rather than isolated instances. For example, there may be a family event which interferes with appropriate parenting on only a short-term basis. What is important to look for are recurring instances which develop into a pattern. Parental behaviors which may serve as indices of child neglect fall into two broad categories: the physical needs of self and children; and, insuring appropriate educational experiences.

MEETING THE PHYSICAL NEEDS OF SELF AND CHILDREN

Observations of the physical characteristics of children may lead professionals to suspect neglect is occurring at home. An investigation of the children's physical conditions may reveal a number of parental behaviors which either directly or indirectly contribute to specific and overall instances of physical neglect.

Failure to feed children adequately. Young children are incapable of providing adequate nutrition for themselves, thus it is the duty of parents to meet the needs of children in this area. Neglecting parents often fail

to assume the responsibility to feed their children, or feed them a non-nutritious diet. This failure to provide an appropriate diet is not an act of punishment, as it is with parents who abuse their children, but rather an act of unintentional omission (Young, 1964).

Failure to insure children's adequate medical care. Teachers often become aware of possible child neglect when young children's medical conditions remain untreated. Visual, dental, or hearing problems which are not brought to proper medical attention exemplify such conditions. They may also involve chronic infections, lingering illnesses and contagious diseases which, though very obvious to professionals, are disregarded by neglecting parents (Fontana, 1973). As previously noted, this does not appear to be a deliberate act but is more likely the result of parents not fully understanding the seriousness of children's condition and need for medical attention.

Failure to maintain good personal hygiene. Neglected children are often prevented from being a part of a group because of the way they look or smell. Their poor hygiene is the result of parents not meeting their basic needs for personal cleanliness (e.g., bathing, washing hair, brushing teeth). Neglecting parents tend to be unaware that the physical appearance of their children is of concern to others, especially to the children themselves. These parents are typically dirty and unkempt, indicating a lack of self-respect and an inability to maintain society's standards of personal appearance (Johnson & Morse, 1968).

Failure to clothe children appropriately. Most young children are incapable of choosing proper clothing for themselves. When allowed to choose their own clothing children typically select clothes that are familiar and well liked rather than which provide protection and comfort. Frequently, neglecting

parents do not make the effort to carefully select appropriate clothing for their children. Clothes that do not fit, are inadequate for weather conditions, or are inappropriate for their sex are often worn by neglected children. It is the responsibility of parents, not children, to insure children are dressed appropriately. Unfortunately, neglecting parents often do not accomplish this task (Polansky, DeSaix & Sharlin, 1972).

Failure to supervise and protect children. Some, though by no means all, neglected children are exposed to potentially hazardous situations because of inadequate supervision (Young, 1964). A noticeable characteristic of many neglecting parents is their relative indifference to their children. This often leads to parents not knowing where their children are or who is caring for them. Such indifference may result in children being left unattended for long periods of time and increases the likelihood of their experiencing harm. These behaviors support the inference that neglecting parents are not fully aware of young children's needs to be supervised and protected from potentially dangerous environmental conditions.

Failure to provide adequate shelter. Home visits, if possible, can provide school personnel with important information when trying to determine whether or not neglect is occurring. One of the basic needs of all individuals is adequate shelter. Children need to be housed in environments which are safe and provide protection from the natural elements (e.g., wind, rain, snow, extreme temperatures). Parents of neglected children often fail to provide a safe and healthy environment for their children (Polansky et. al., 1972; Polansky, Chalmers, Buttenweiser & Williams, 1981). While many conditions of substandard housing may be associated with poverty, professionals should bear in mind that poverty and neglect are not synonymous. Many low income parents

adequately house their children, while others expose their children to a residence in which there are bare electrical wires, cardboard in place of windows, poor or non-existent plumbing, or accumulated garbage and trash. It is the latter group who fall within the category of neglecting parents.

INSURING APPROPRIATE EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES

Teachers are often the first professionals to have an opportunity to interact with parents. Because of this, it is important that they become familiar with parental behaviors which can indicate children are experiencing educational neglect. These behaviors are quite specific and in many cases may indicate children are being neglected in other areas as well.

Failure to insure children have an opportunity to learn. Most individuals would agree it is the responsibility of parents to guarantee children are exposed to appropriate learning situations. Accordingly, parents must be certain that children are enrolled in school when it is appropriate, that they not be habitually absent, and that they arrive at school at the appropriate time. Failure to concern themselves with their children's attendance and involvement in school is often one of the first behaviors of neglecting parents noted by teachers.

Failure to adhere to designated school hours. Schools establish times when children are expected to be present and depart at the end of the day. Neglecting parents frequently send children to school before hours of operation begin or fail to pick them up at the end of the day. The latter of the two occurs much more frequently. Neglecting parents sometimes forget about their children, do not want to be bothered by having to make a trip to school, or fail to make other arrangements for their children's transportation. Whatever the reason, this behavior indicates an indifference to their children and the low priority they have in the parents' lives.

Failure to participate in school activities. Schools usually schedule activities throughout the year which allow parents to visit their children's classrooms and to interact with the teacher and other parents. One purpose of these contacts is to enable professionals and parents to discuss the children's developments. Neglecting parents are frequently noted to not attend these functions. When teachers repeatedly do not see parents at these events there should be some concern as to why they do not attend. It may be the scheduled times conflict with other commitments, parents do not feel it is important for them to attend, or they are indifferent to their children's progress and involvement in school.

Failure to keep scheduled appointments. A further indication of neglect of children's educational needs is parental failure to meet with school personnel at scheduled times. Most parents are very conscientious when teachers desire to meet concerning children's development. Those who do not want to meet with their children's teachers are the exception and their unwillingness to meet may constitute a form of neglect. If parents are not concerned with their children's progress in schools it is highly possible they are indifferent to additional aspects of their children's development as well. Again, educators should investigate other parental behaviors to determine if neglect is indeed occurring.

WORKING WITH PARENTS WHO NEGLECT

Once it has been established that a parent is neglecting the needs of a child what is the teacher to do? Perhaps one of the most important tasks is to recognize and accept that one may not be able to bring an immediate improvement to the situation. The factors which have led to this condition of neglect are complex and in all likelihood have been present for

many years. Consequently, efforts to ameliorate the problem may be slow to bring about change.

After the condition of neglect has been recognized, however, a number of actions can be initiated. If the form of neglect is severe one should immediately notify the local Department of Social Services. Each state has mandated that professionals contact the appropriate agency when neglect or abuse is suspected. Legislation has been written in such a way that anonymity and protection from liability are guaranteed, thus one should not hesitate to act. On a much more informal, direct and immediate level a variety of actions can be taken (Hally, Polansky & Polansky, 1980). The teacher, because of one's existing interest and involvement with the neglected child, can:

(1) show feelings of genuine concern for the parents and the family

(2) inform parents that their standard of child care is not meeting the community's standards

(3) explain the possible legal consequences of inadequate child care

(4) attempt to engage either or both parents in a parents' group designed to increase their knowledge of children's development

(5) guide the family to needed services and facilitate the use of these services

(6) provide parents with information and step-by-step guidelines for accomplishing tasks

(7) be a model for child rearing techniques and for instilling values for family living

(8) help parents keep their fears and anxieties from growing out of proportion

(9) introduce expectations for the parents to meet

(10) interact closely and cooperatively with professionals in the community who have been trained to work with these parents (i.e., social workers)

It must be recognized that educators do not have adequate time, facilities or opportunities to single-handedly educate neglecting parents concerning how their behaviors must change so they can adequately meet the needs of their children. Instead, teachers must be willing to work conjointly with agencies in the community designed for this purpose. By successfully identifying suspected cases of neglect, bringing them to the attention of appropriate agencies, and interacting with neglecting parents in a supportive and educative capacity, teachers will be making significant contributions to the lives of neglected children and their parents. The concern and efforts of a teacher may very well be the first step in ending a child's tragic experience of being neglected. The responsibility this implies is great, yet so is the potential benefit to the child.

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